

## “La Pista 4’s *Cadáveres*: Radiophonics and the Argentinean Staging of Disappearance”

Jean Graham-Jones

Radio is the suppressed double of our visually material universe.<sup>1</sup>

On Sunday evenings during the 1998 Buenos Aires theatre season, in the bar-café of the now-gone experimental theatre space Babilonia, performance troupe La Pista 4 presented *Cadáveres*. For forty-five minutes, the four performers — longtime Pista 4 members Luis Ziembroski, Gabriel Correa, and Luis Herrera, together with guest artist María Inés Aldaburu — spoke, chanted, and effectively deconstructed six poems written during Argentina’s 1976-83 dictatorship by renowned and controversial Argentinean poet-anthropologist Néstor Perlongher (1949-92). The 1998 performances began with the three men winding through the bar and playing trombone, trumpet (in some performances a clarinet), and bass drum; the opening four-note dirge was then quickly transformed first into a Brazilian carnival tune before finally settling into a Peronist march. The musicians proceeded to accompany Aldaburu’s recitations with discordant, at times barely articulated, sounds before moving to individual microphones set on a table covered in a black cloth. There Correa, Herrera, and Ziembroski played off of each other as they experimented with their amplified voices and a prerecorded sound track, which they controlled using a tape player set atop the onstage table. The performances ended with an apparent nod back at an Italian Futurist *sintesi*: confetti fell over four pairs of legs (two male pairs wearing fishnets), the only parts of the performers’ bodies made visible below the table, as the performers together recited the evening’s final poem.<sup>2</sup>

Although all six performed texts are littered with the dead — Eva Perón, Anne Frank, carnival ghosts, flayed boys, and human-animals in

extinction — it was Perlongher's best-known poem that lent the production its title and most immediate historical referent. "Cadáveres" appeared fourth on the bill; and its eighteen-minute recitation constituted over one-third of the performance. Legendarily written on a 1981 bus-ride as Perlongher left behind dictatorship Buenos Aires (as well as multiple arrests and beatings) for a permanent move to São Paulo, the poem howls about the 30,000 disappeared by the repressive regime. The initial verses provide a sense of the poem's unrelentingly hypnotic rage:

Bajo las matas  
En los pajonales  
Sobre los puentes  
En los canales  
Hay Cadáveres

En la trilla de un tren que nunca se detiene  
En la estela de un barco que naufraga  
En una olilla, que se desvanece  
En los muelles los apeaderos los trampolines los malecones  
Hay Cadáveres (Perlongher, "Cadáveres" 111)<sup>3</sup>

Working against the text's merciless litany and interacting with Edgardo Cardozo's ornate sound track, the Pista 4 performers constantly changed sonic directions: one actor spoke inaudibly or distorted his voice by placing a glass over his mouth while another countered the rhythms of the third actor's animated radio announcer covering a soccer match with the melancholic swoop of a tango-crooner, and all came together as if they were members of an out-of-tune neighborhood *murga* band.<sup>4</sup>

Before beginning the Babilonia run, the troupe had performed *Cadáveres* at an experimental music festival in Buenos Aires and at various poetry encounters; afterward the piece would be reprised until 2003 for theatre festivals and art fairs. Such diverse artistic venues confounded easy synopsis or even labeling of a performance that already eluded obvious categorization. Pista 4 member Ziembski attempted one description in a pre-opening newspaper interview: "Es una zona intermedia entre un recital de poesía y un esquema más teatral. Las voces salen por micrófonos y hay esbozos de actuación."<sup>5</sup> The Babilonia production's handbill even added a suggested mode of reception to its own brief summation: "Una estructura de tiempos y combinaciones matemáticas azarosas, fue forjando una especie de partitura sobre la que se montó el poema... 'Cadáveres' debe ser escuchado

casi como una pieza radiofónica; de esas que nunca escucharemos en una F.M.” A live performance of a radio-play that was never broadcast nor, to my knowledge, even recorded: Was this radio-theatre? Experimental music? A poetry slam? Performance art?

We can say with certainty that *Cadáveres* was the product of a group that had achieved local and international fame for extreme innovation during a time when experimental performance was the norm in Buenos Aires: the late 1980s and early 1990s “underground” theatre movement.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, and perhaps because of the group’s notoriety for defying easy categorization, its members’ eclectic backgrounds in theatre, music, and circus clowning,<sup>7</sup> and its dedication to fusing different arts and techniques, La Pista 4 has never received much critical attention beyond its inclusion on nearly every list of important experimental groups to come out of the nation’s mid-1980s return to democracy.<sup>8</sup> This essay undertakes a preliminary yet long-overdue critical look at La Pista 4’s experimental theatrics through the specific case of *Cadáveres*. In order to do so, I propose that we consider theatrical materiality as not only visual but also aural, specifically as such materiality has been theorized in studies of avant-garde radiophonic art.<sup>9</sup> I argue that the 1998 production offered new ideas about staging what, by the late 1990s, was a ubiquitous subject whose cultural representation had become tragically clichéd: the 30,000 *desaparecidos* still largely unaccounted for and only recently accorded official recognition. In seeking alternatives to representing these absent-yet-present bodies, the production revisited three cultural phenomena of Argentinean redemocratization: post-post-avant-garde poetry, the theatrical staging of disappearance, and FM radio. The result not only materially resituated the performance of disappearance but also constructively responded to the tyranny of the visual in contemporary cultural production.

Perlongher’s highly experimental poetry reflected his multiple praxes: ex-Trotskyite, ex-sociologist, an academic with graduate degrees in social anthropology, a pioneer in Argentina’s gay liberation movements, an avid reader of Deleuze and Guattari, an expert on male prostitution in Brazil (and author of one of the most influential academic essays on the subject), and a practitioner of the ecstatic drug-enhanced Santo Daime religion at the time of his AIDS-related death in 1992. Perlongher referred to his poetry as *neobarroso* — an homage to favorite writers Spanish Baroque poet Luis de Góngora and Cuban Neo-Baroque author José Lezama Lima as well as a play on the words *barroco* / *barroso*: “barroco: perla irregular, nódulo de barro” (Perlongher, “Introducción” 101). Perlongher’s other preferred poet

was Artaud,<sup>10</sup> a rather unsurprising choice when we think of the Argentinean's personal and creative search for "spaces for desire and communities based on desire" (Bollig 157). Perlongher's post-post-avant-garde<sup>11</sup> poetry is a rich and eclectic mix built upon "expanding the poetic lexicon, using everyday language, writing about sex or perversion, mixing avant-garde techniques with political denunciation" (Bollig 182). As Jorge Monteleone suggests, Perlongher's "mirada corroída" was largely the consequence of a repressive environment: "puesto que no puede mirar, invierte el lugar del ojo hacia la apartada boca quevedesca, la lengua de letrina, el ojo del culo. Grafitti porno, cuando no de oro, la voz del orificio" (220-21). His disturbing experimental poetics were formally concrete: verse combined with prose, line lengths radically varied, entire poems written in italics while others mixed typefaces, certain nouns capitalized at certain times, and ellipses and spacing employed to exasperating effect. Most, if not all, of these elements are present in the printed text of "Cadáveres," which, like much of the author's dictatorship-era poetry, attempts to give form to all that has been repressed or erased. The poem concludes:

Yo soy aquél que ayer nomás...

Ella es la que...

Veíase el arpa...

En alfombrada sala...

Villegas o

Hay Cadáveres

.....

.....

.....

.....

No hay nadie?, pregunta la mujer del Paraguay.

Respuesta: No hay cadáveres. (Perlongher, "Cadáveres" 123)

Perlongher's decidedly visual treatment of the missing bodies found its theatrical counterpart in the staging of disappearance in post-dictatorship Buenos Aires theatre. From the first explicit representations of the disappeared (such as Carlos Somigliana's 1982 *Oficial primero*, where the stage ended up buried in bodies) throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, embodiment was emphasized; indeed, it seemed a prerequisite for any play on the subject. Bodies abounded on local stages: there were mute corpses, victims yanked under tables, loudly furious Antigones, lamenting Eurydices, and Evita phantasms; even when the individual was split into two, the body separated

from the voice, the physical cadaver dominated staging and reception.<sup>12</sup> The disappeared were embodied on the Buenos Aires stage in such a way that it became nearly impossible to think of their representation as taking a form other than corporeal ghosting. However, what had made dramatic sense in early redemocratized Argentina — when it was urgently necessary to unearth and give human form to all that the military regime had covered up — dangerously neared fetishism ten years later. The more realistic of Buenos Aires theatrical productions insisted on incorporating the disappeared into the historical pantheon through the most literal of embodied performances, while many experimental performances of the late 1990s avoided overt theatrical engagement with their country's recent history. La Pista 4's *Cadáveres* constituted one notable exception.<sup>13</sup>

To fully understand La Pista 4's detour from the representational dead-end of privileging the visual by experimental poetry and traditional embodied performance, I turn to a third phenomenon of early redemocratization. The 1980s witnessed the explosion of FM radio in Argentina. FM not only provided an alternative to commercial AM stations, but, in keeping with the Italian free-radio model, from 1988 on "unidentified" FM stations became some of the most listened-to radio in Buenos Aires (and the rest of the country). There were — depending on one's perspective — clandestine, illegal, free, neighborhood, and community radio stations transmitting all over the city, albeit at a reduced range (similar to US college radio stations), and their impact was astounding. FM stations transmitted programs from inside mental hospitals, geriatric homes, and jails — all created by their inhabitants; they communicated vital information to otherwise-isolated dwellers in slums and to non-Spanish speakers; and they welcomed artistic experimentation.<sup>14</sup>

The growth of FM coincided with the country's return to democracy and outburst of creative activity, especially among the younger and more experimental artists. FM radio provided another outlet for expression in a country testing its still-precarious freedom. Nevertheless, Argentinean FM radio has never explored the limits of theatrical performance beyond the continued broadcasting of radio-plays (hugely popular in 1940s and 1950s Argentina) and the occasional "soundscape." Nor has radio's potential been fully explored in performance, with rare exceptions, such as that of 1960s *happenista* Marta Minujín, who used radio as a medium for achieving experiential "simultaneidad."<sup>15</sup> Performance's radiophonic potential — even on the almost-anything-goes FM dial — has not been exploited, as La Pista 4's program notes make clear: "'Cadáveres' debe ser escuchado casi

como una pieza radiofónica; *de esas que nunca escucharemos en una F.M.*” [emphasis added].

The performance of the evening’s final poem (“Por qué seremos tan hermosas”) recalled another, much earlier experiment with radio and live performance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Italian Futurists created “radiophonic theatre” — live performances that were recorded and later pressed into disks. La Pista 4’s exposure of their legs under the table as the final poem’s sole “visual” performance element echoes F.T. Marinetti’s 1915 theatrical “synthesis,” *Le Basi* [Feet], whose legs-and-feet photo still circulates on the Internet.<sup>16</sup> The group’s selection of an image from a theatrical (and not radio) *sintesi* might cause us to suspect a reversal in direction: whereas traces of the radio body were seen on the early-twentieth-century Futurist stage, the late-twentieth-century *Cadáveres* suggests an attempt on the part of the over-determined visual stage body to (re)gain a radiophonic existence.

Joe Milutis builds his study of the relationship between radio art and avant-garde performance on Allen Weiss’s concept of radiophonics.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the common understanding of radio airwaves as extracorporeal signals, for scholars like Weiss, Milutis, and Gregory Whitehead, the body itself becomes the mediating term in radiophonic signification. As Milutis states, “[T]he body is source, substance, and medium of radio. [...] The radio artist is both producer and consumer, audience and performer, of his own electroacoustical surroundings” (70). Milutis contends that “[r]adio’s most fundamental, ontological feature is precisely [its] ability to break down ontological borders, a process which is very similar to certain forms of psychosis” (65). Avant-garde radio performs “paranoid-schizophrenic stereophony”: it is paranoic — “the radiophonic universe takes the voice away from the body, stealing words... and transmitting them everywhere” — and “schizophonic” — “radio loads more voices into the head than the body can withstand” (65). It is therefore no surprise that Antonin Artaud wrote several pieces for radio and that the recording of his last written work, the 1947 radio-play *To Have Done with the Judgment of God* (recorded but then censored by French radio), concluded with Artaud’s own voice calling for a “body without organs,” one of his most enduring images.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, radio’s “interiorizing technology” promised an Artaudian “spectacle that is more felt than seen” (Graver 51).<sup>19</sup> Nor is the physical radiophonic experience necessarily solitary (or unidirectional, as Brecht feared). Weiss makes this clear: “In radio, not only is the voice separated from the body, and not only does it return to the speaker as a disembodied presence — it is, furthermore,

thrust into the public arena to mix its sonic destiny with that of other voices” (qtd. in Milutis 66).

If Italian Futurist radiophonic theatre presented “a mad body..., a body beyond the modes of reason that reason has presented,” vibrating “erotically through contact with out-of-body signals that deconstruct...traditional psychology” (Milutis 66), La Pista 4’s very Argentinean *Cadáveres* sought to radiophonically reclaim the paranoid-schizophonic madness that mimesis had excluded from national theatrical representation. The production effectively disrupted body-voice identification as it created layers of voices that proved impossible to consciously track; its sounds mixed with those of its audience in a spectacle more felt than seen. Yet this was not a radio-play but ostensibly a *performance* of a radio-play; that is, the performance’s materiality was visual as well as aural. By “staging” a radio-play, La Pista 4 achieved a goal shared by body — and radio — artists, Milutis asserts, that of “dematerializ[ing] the art object into performing present” (70). This spatiotemporal shift holds an important consequence for Argentinean cultural production: through disrupting sign and referent in a stage (not broadcast) performance, *Cadáveres* freed the word from literary visual representation much as it freed the performing body from mimesis. Said shift might also explain why the group ultimately decided not to include Perlongher’s own recorded voice in the performance after months of working with the cassette. The recording (taped by Aldaburu herself during one of Perlongher’s visits to Buenos Aires), albeit aural and not visual, was still not sufficiently disruptive of the vocal sign and its referent, Perlongher’s own now-disappeared body. The recording was not incorporated into the final sound track, designer Cardozo noted, “para distanciarnos un poco.”<sup>20</sup> The group’s decision highlights the risks of the mimetic, even if it is disembodied through aurality. If, as Milutis writes, “the art of radio... paradoxically recuperate[s] the referent without mimetically reproducing ‘life’” (63), *Cadáveres* managed to recuperate multiple explicitly Argentinean referents without mimetically reproducing their “deaths.”

*Cadáveres* also provided Argentinean performance with the possibility of a future-present-past simultaneity. Instead of condemning theatre to representing past horrors in present bodies, *Cadáveres* made “the future strange by the avant-garde use of an ‘obsolete’ technology” (Milutis 67). All the poems performed, each one written during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, dealt with the effects of repression in its myriad forms (political, historical, cultural, sexual...), but, by freeing these effects from the aesthetics of visual mimesis through an insistence on aural experimentation using “old” media



(e.g., the radio-play, the onstage tape-player), the production reinserted the political into Argentinean experimental performance and forecast a future made strange — a radio-play we'll never hear on the radio.

In sum, *Cadáveres* sought to mediate its own theatrical condition by (re)emphasizing the materiality of the aural in performance. It thus became an attempt not only to work against the privileging of Perlongher's poetry as visual artifact (or even as authentic "spoken word"); it also provided an alternative for the staging of historical corpses that have all too frequently been physically embodied and fetishized in performance. By disrupting the identification of disappearance with the (re)appeared body, *Cadáveres* provided an alternative to Argentinean theatre's apparent choice of mimetic embodiment as the only means of re-presenting and re-memembering the disappeared body. In the process, the production questioned contemporary privileging of the visual power of the written word and embodied performance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joe Milutis, "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avant-Garde," *TDR* 40, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 67.

<sup>2</sup> The six poems, in the order they were performed, are: "El cadaver," "La murga, los polacos," "Érase un animal," "Cadáveres," "Canción de amor para los Nazis en Baviera," and "Por qué seremos tan hermosas." All poems except for "Cadáveres" were first published in *Austria-Hungria*.

<sup>3</sup> The poem was first published in *Revista de (poesía)* 1 (April 1984). An audiotape of Perlongher reciting "Cadáveres" was released by Último Reino in 1991. A partial translation is included in *The Argentina Reader*, edited by Gabriela Nouzeilles and Graciela Montaldo. The *LATR* reader may be interested to know that not one play or performance script appears excerpted in this 580-page "essential introduction to Argentina's history, culture, and society," and only one play, Gambaro's *La malasangre*, is included in the list of suggestions for further reading.

<sup>4</sup> See Cecilia Hopkins for another account of the production. *Murgas* are (neighborhood as well as professional) music groups that participate in parades, community events, and concert performances; they are extremely popular throughout the entire River Plate region.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Claudio Zeiger. It's telling that his pre-opening note leads off with the warning "ortodoxos de la lírica y la dramaturgia, abstenerse."

<sup>6</sup> La Pista 4 built its reputation on only a handful of productions, of which the most-cited are *Esperes* (1988) and *Nada lentamente* (1993). The group performed in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, France, Spain, Uruguay, Venezuela, and the United States.

<sup>7</sup> The group's name is itself an homage as well as alternative to the circus tradition and its three rings.

<sup>8</sup> In his various histories of the 1980s-90s "new" theatre, critic Jorge Dubatti consistently mentions La Pista 4. An early example would be *Teatro '90: el nuevo teatro en Buenos Aires*, where several



production photos of the group are prominently displayed but no discussion of the specific productions is included.

<sup>9</sup> Radio art has been woefully under-studied, for multiple reasons, as Dan Lander notes: "There are many factors which contribute to this absence including the prominence of the visual over the aural, industrial impositions, the practice of transposing other media onto a radiophonic space, the lack of an autonomous theory of sound, and finally, a generalized disengagement with the spatial and temporal shift brought about by the new electronic technologies. In addition, radio artists have had to confront the regulation of contents, political and conceptual, that follows with state regulation of the airwaves" ("Radiocasting").

<sup>10</sup> Perlongher names Góngora, Lezama Lima, and Artaud (in that order) as his answer to the tenth question ("¿Cuál es su poeta favorito?") in "69 preguntas a Néstor Perlongher," published first in 1989 in the magazine *Babel* and reprinted in *Prosa Plebeya* (14).

<sup>11</sup> As Bollig explains, the early Argentinean avant-garde poets, like Jorge Luis Borges, were not nearly as politicized as their European counterparts. The combination of politics and poetic experimentation came with the next generation of "social poets" such as Juan Gelman and Uruguayan Mario Benedetti. Perlongher belonged to a later third generation of Argentinean poets, often referred to as post-post-avant-garde (178-82).

<sup>12</sup> I refer to, respectively, Somigliana's play, staged in the last year of dictatorship; Aída Bortnik's 1983 *De a uno*; Griselda Gambaro's 1986 *Antígona furiosa*; Gambaro's 1992 chamber-opera *La casa sin sosiego*; Mónica Viñao's 1997 *des / Enlace*; and Eduardo Pavlovsky's 1990 *Paso de dos*. As others, perhaps most extensively Diana Taylor in *Disappearing Acts*, have pointed out, the disappeared body on the Argentinean (sociocultural) stage is almost always overwhelmingly female. I leave for another occasion a discussion of how such performed embodiment of disappearance has led to an over-privileging of the visual in the reception of the performances of this period. Only rarely since redemocratization have the disappeared been represented other than corporeally; one exception would be Ricardo Bartís's 1992 version of *Hamlet* and Gertrudis's shoe collection.

<sup>13</sup> A noted shift in representation and topic has occurred with the increasing focus on the children of the disappeared (most notably through the annual HIJOS and Madres sponsored festival Teatroxlaidentidad), but I would argue that the prevailing aesthetic remains mimetic.

<sup>14</sup> See Carlos Ulanovsky, et al., especially chapter 12, for an overview of the FM phenomenon in Argentina. While many of these local FM stations still operate, they no longer exert the influence they did well into the 1990s.

<sup>15</sup> In 1966 Minujín staged what Michael Kirby calls "probably the first performance piece in history to make use of several coordinated mass media" (Kirby, "Marta Minujín's 'Simultaneity in Simultaneity'" 148). Minujín conceived the happening as an "intercontinental" presentation with Allan Kaprow in the United States and Wolf Vostell in Germany. While the project was never fully realized, Minujín did make effective use of live performance, television, and radio in her event. See Kirby's article for a detailed description of the Buenos Aires performance.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Kirby and Victoria Nes Kirby. The "Futurism and Futurists" website also has many scripts of the theatrical and radio *sintesi* in English translation, as well as the *Basi* photograph.

<sup>17</sup> See Weiss, *Phantasmic Radio*.

<sup>18</sup> See also Weiss, "Radio, Death, and the Devil."

<sup>19</sup> Artaud deemed the recording of his radio-play "a model in miniature of what I want to do with my Theatre of Cruelty" (qtd. in Tony Gardner, I:114).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Zeiger. The only other reason cited is "razones técnicas."

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